

# The Way Back

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Preacher: Ben Ferguson

[ 0 : 0 0 ] And we have the privilege of being able to listen to Ben Ferguson as he preaches for us. And so let's pray for him right now.

Father, we thank you for Ben. We thank you for the service that you have brought to us through him and the ministry through him that you have done through this last year.

And we ask that you would grant us as a congregation open ears that we may hear what you're saying to us through your word. We ask this in your name and for your glory. Amen.

Thanks, Jim. I'd like to point out that earlier Jim said something. He read the prophecy of Zacchaeus and he said that very child will be preaching to us tonight. So I was like, is he calling me a child?

I kind of feel like a child. So that'll work. I confess to you that this week I've had a little trouble writing my sermon because I've been sucked into the melodrama, which is American election politics.

[ 1 : 1 3 ] This week, for those of you who don't know, there was a debate between McCain and Obama. And I was so excited for the melee that was going to happen that night.

And it was a melee. It was like kids throwing rocks at each other on the schoolyard in some ways. They were asked a question and then they would make a caricature of the other person's position. But I remember having a number of political type conversations this week.

And I remember words coming out of my mouth like, I wonder who's going to fix the economy. Who's going to fix gas prices? Who's going to fix all these things? And I was startled to hear kind of messianic words coming out of my mouth.

So I was wondering who's going to save us. It's kind of what was coming out of my mouth. And I have to ask forgiveness of you guys before I preach the sermon because John is calling us to repentance tonight.

And he's calling down our false gods. And I felt that even in me this week. Tonight we're looking at Luke 3. So if you could open your Bibles, that would be fantastic.

[ 2 : 2 0 ] And we're looking at John the Baptizer. Like what I like to call Crazy John.

I always picture him as almost a biker or something. Or like a carpenter in overalls or something. He lives out in the wilderness in homemade clothes and eats a steady diet of bugs and sugar.

I think I had a college roommate like that once. He almost ate exclusively red vines and Mountain Dew, I think. But John is a wild man.

He comes from the outskirts of Israel and preaches with more force than I think most of us could handle today, including myself. I'm not sure if I could sit through a whole John the Baptist sermon.

What makes him so interesting, though, is that he is so utterly unafraid. He's not cowed by all the politics of the time. He does not fear for his life.

[ 3 : 22 ] He simply speaks the words of the Lord to whoever will listen, whether that be tax collectors or the greatest tyrants of his day. And this is kind of the first challenge of our text, is that in the beginning of Luke 3, we have this whole list of names, these important names, these tyrannical names.

And I have to ask myself, why in the beginning of this passage, and he does this in the first three chapters, why mention people like, in the time of Tetrarch, whatever, where is it?

He says, in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being Tetrarch, why this list of names? Why mention Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Annas, and Caiaphas?

Some might say, and they'd probably be right, to a certain extent, that Luke is trying to be historically accurate. He's trying to set us in a context. But if you look at these names, they seem familiar.

They have a familiar ring in our ear, especially if you've read the gospel before. First, you see Caesar, whose very name means aged lord, Caesar Augustus.

[ 4 : 34 ] He's the ruler of the world, and the person whose name is evoked at Jesus' trial. The charge against Jesus was that he forbade the people to pay taxes to Caesar and claim to be king.

There's Herod, who was a Greek Jew, interestingly enough, and who built the great city of Tiberias on a Jewish graveyard, which means that Jews actually couldn't come into that city because it would make them unclean.

You have Caiaphas and Annas, who are kind of battling for the religious parts of the group, the religious end. Both were powerful members of the Sanhedrin, but Caiaphas was actually extremely instrumental in Jesus' crucifixion.

This is more than just simple historical context. In the last three chapters of Luke, we've been chronicling the coming of a king. It is like the refrain in a song.

It happens over and over again. At Jesus' birth, the angels call Jesus Lord. In Mary's beautiful song, she tells of the coming Lord, who will take bread out of the mouth of the rich and give it to the poor, who will make things new.

[ 5 : 47 ] Luke is telling us that this coming kingdom is going to cut against the kingdoms of this world. These things, these two realities, the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of heaven are coming into collision and something catastrophic is going to happen.

And what's interesting, this is kind of a side thing, John's life is kind of a foretaste of this. You see in verse 20 that he's arrested and we know the end of the story there that he's eventually beheaded.

So he's kind of a literary, almost a literary device by Luke to give us a foretaste of what's going to happen. Well, moving along. After the list of names, we have the quotation of Isaiah 40.

And the passage, at least Luke's use of the passage, is naming John as the voice that is crying out in the desert, making straight the paths of the Lord.

And this passage is so important to the Israel people, Israeli people, the Israelites. It was like a song chorus read over and over to Israel while they were in Babylon.

[ 6 : 55 ] It was probably something that they said to themselves it was a promise of comfort, of God's vindication and salvation from their occupiers, from the people that had taken them into exile.

And when they heard this, it called to mind that God was coming to judge their enemies and to save them. And this is what makes it so shocking, though, that John prepares the way not by creating a violent uprising and asking people to stop paying their taxes, John.

He prepares the way of the kingdom by calling people to repentance. John prepares the way of the kingdom, of this kingdom, by calling for repentance.

Luke shows us that repentance is how the kingdom is announced. It is how his people are prepared to receive their Lord. The mountains, valleys, and rough roads that block the Lord's way are and have always been the pride and arrogance of us human beings.

Repentance is that first movement away from ourselves and toward God. This is still in the introduction of Luke, and it seems that as we read this chapter, Luke is encouraging us to repent with the tax collectors, soldiers, and all the rest, and prepare in our own hearts the way for the Lord's coming.

[ 8 : 24 ] And what does this word mean? Repent. And tonight, I would like to explore that with you. So would you please pray with me? Father, we thank you for your word.

We thank you that it is true. Lord, we thank you that your holiness convicts us. Father, we pray that it will convict us. help us to see you tonight.

Help us again return to you and know our need. Help us to not hear a heavy word and turn away, but Lord, but to run to you. We love and thank you that you have done everything to come to us.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Well, it's funny that Luke calls what he's doing, preaching the good news.

Especially considering, after we get over the list in the Old Testament quotation, that he begins by saying, you brood of vipers, who told you to, and he's using this finger, he's using the pointer finger when he said that, you brood of vipers, who told you to flee the coming wrath?

[ 9 : 40 ] First of all, wrath does not sound like good news. And secondly, he's calling me names. And I don't like that. I probably would have said, see you later, man. If I wanted to be called names, I could go back to middle school.

Nonetheless, though, this is how John is bringing what he's called in the previous chapter the knowledge salvation. And Friedrich Buchner helps us understand this when he writes, the gospel is bad news before it is good news.

The bad news for these folks is that they were not ready for the king to come. A few years ago, or actually when I was a kid, my dad went away on a trip.

He was working in Hong Kong before he moved out there. And he left for like five, six months. And I remember, my dad's a little bit more of an authoritarian, he's a little more of a disciplinarian than my mom was.

And I remember when he came back, there was this kind of holy fear in me. You know, I had, over the five months, and I love my dad, I was looking forward to it, I had an excitement.

[ 10 : 51 ] But there was this sense in which I now kind of got to live the way I wanted to live as like a 13-year-old boy. Or something. Because, you know, not completely, but in a way that wasn't possible with my dad being there.

And I remember that feeling of anxiety and excitement that came with his coming back. And I think about it, and I say, you know, there was a fear there because I knew that my life had to change again in relationship to him.

And I think similar, Israel's in a similar situation, but a lot worse. They had lived their lives waiting for God to come, but he hadn't come for a really long time.

Some of these folks just ended up working with the Romans and fleecing their own people. They worked with their occupiers who were still constantly oppressing them. And since it had been a long time, the Lord didn't come.

Maybe they thought he wouldn't come. Maybe they forgot. Or maybe they just didn't care. At least until they heard he was coming. And the bad news then before the good news is that God is coming and he's holy.

[ 12 : 08 ] They knew that he was holy and this freaks them out. We see in the Exodus story, which is rehearsed every year in their faith, we see in the Exodus story that in the tabernacle, the Israelites had to be protected from God's direct presence by a series of curtains and separations.

Otherwise, God's holiness would kill them. This is what makes Jesus so extraordinary. On Yom Kippur, when the priest would make atonement by sacrificing for the people, they would tie a rope around him just in case he died.

A bell would jingle and they'd know, oh, the priest died. Let's pull him out. Apparently, you guys don't find that funny. You probably shouldn't. I mean, it's pretty intense.

God's holiness is a burning fire. It's a consuming and frightful reality. Frightful enough to make hordes of folks come out and see some crazy man on the edge of the Jordan.

And we learn from this that repentance, firstly, and this is my first point, is a turning away from sin. It is a godly sorrow that begins to free us from our self-rule, self-interest, and pride.

[ 13 : 28 ] It begins with faith in God, which causes us to run. And it causes us to cry out with the psalmist, save me, Lord. Save me. It's interesting to note that the ones coming for baptism were called vipers, and yet they stayed.

They knew they weren't innocent. They knew that God was coming, and they were not innocent. This godly sorrow is an action of the will where we say to God, you are our Lord, and the world is not, and I am not.

I remember, it is a change of our affections as well. Now, I remember a friend of mine telling me a story once that his dad had recently given his life over to the Lord, to Jesus, and he came down one day, down the stairs, and he sees his dad in the yard.

He's got a brick in his hand, right? And he sees him running across the yard and then chucking this brick like a full baseball swing, you know, and baseball throw, I should say.

And he heard this crash, and he runs outside, and he sees that his dad is throwing bricks through a TV, that his dad was smiting the TV with a brick.

[ 14 : 47 ] I can end the sermon there. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. I'm not advocating that we should start busting our TVs with bricks, but it does make the point that repentance is a radical transformation of our affections.

This man now hated his TV enough to throw a brick through it. That was the response of God's conviction in his life. And it's kind of extraordinary, but it's kind of crazy too.

This godly sorrow is a change of the affections where we learn to love the things God loves and hate the things he hates. But it's not only this.

It's not only the change of the will. And John shows us this. Moving along in the text, we see that John is not done telling us what repentance is. The part we've talked about so far I think is fairly familiar to us.

It's that inner psychological distress, that godly sorrow, God's holiness and our need coming into contact. John moves us further though, but saying two peculiar things.

[ 16 : 01 ] The first is to bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance. Say it again. Bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance. And the second is, do not say you are the sons of Abraham.

The fruits is explained later. People say, you know, he says, the fire's coming. He says, you know, how can we be saved? And they tell him, let the man who has two tunics give to the one who has none.

And he tells the tax collectors, be honest. Don't take more than you require. He tells the soldiers the same thing. Don't use your power to extort money. And we learned the second thing I want to say about repentance tonight, that repentance is a way of life.

It is, it is a turning from evil, but it is also, it is a turning to what is good. It is an internal reality that bears external fruit. This is an interesting and important point because we are not simply saved from our sins, but we are saved for a kingdom.

I'm going to repeat that. We are not simply saved from our sins, we are saved for a kingdom. And how exciting is that? We are not just saved for our own sake, but we are being brought into something so much greater than ourselves.

[ 17 : 24 ] We pray this even in the Lord's Prayer. Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Leslie Newbigin further illuminates this when he says, the church lives in the midst of history as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reign of God.

From the other side, John shows us that fruits are a necessary part of what it is to be a child of God. He says to the Jew, don't say we have Abraham for a father.

Many Jews thought they were children of God by right or blood. John tells us that you cannot be grandfathered into the faith. God has no grandchildren.

He has only children that are born by faith, repentance, and the Holy Spirit. We must all cry out to the Father for help. We must all surrender our lives to God.

We must all bear fruit. All are leveled before God. And Luke does not even leave us here. In verse 15, the people ask about the Messiah.

[ 18 : 34 ] They basically ask John, are you the king we're looking for? Are you the guy that's going to wipe away all our problems? And like a good best man at a wedding, John diverts the attention from himself to Jesus.

He says, one will come after that will baptize by spirit and by fire. That sounds like John.

Like he has two tattoos, like the spirit and the fire. Like on his forearms or something. But he says, he will baptize you by spirit and fire.

Now, if you read the whole gospel in a sequel to this, or the second half, this is the book of Acts, we know that Luke loves both the spirit and the fire. Luke in this account is looking forward to the coming of the flaming tongues of Pentecost.

When those who believe in Jesus would receive the promised spirit. Which brings me to my final point. Repentance is a miracle work of God. Repentance places us before God and asks him to change us.

[ 19 : 40 ] Buchner writes again, the gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner.

That he is evil in the imagination of his heart. That when he looks in the mirror, what he sees is at least eight parts chicken. Phony. Slob.

That's the tragedy. But it's also the news that he is loved anyway. Cherished. Forgiven. Bleeding to be sure. But bled for. That is the comedy.

The news of the gospel is that extraordinary things happen to him. Just as in fairy tales. Extraordinary things happen. Zacchaeus climbs up a sycamore tree and climbs down a saint.

Paul sets out as a hatchet man for the Pharisees and comes back a fool for Christ. It is impossible for anybody to leave behind the darkness he carries on his back like a snail.

[ 20 : 42 ] For God, all things are possible. we need again to make way for the Lord to rule in our lives. Especially as we come to the table.

Make a smooth path for him. Invite him to tear down the obstacles in our life. Our addictions. Our false gods. And help us to turn from evil to good.

This is the way his kingdom comes. May his kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.